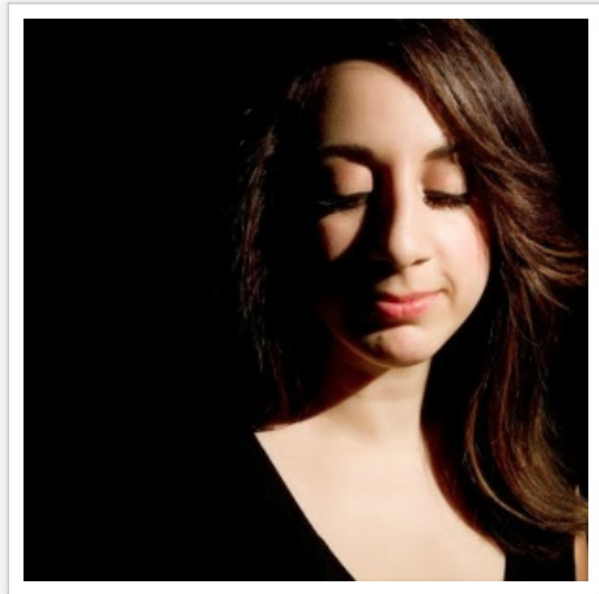


November 20, 2013

This Should Feel Like Home



Mary Kouyoumdjian

The Armenian-American composer [Mary Kouyoumdjian](#) [Koo - yoom - jee - in] envisions a documentary music. Not the musical soundtrack *to* documentaries, but music *as* documentary. With training in experimental practices as well as film scoring, Kouyoumdjian creates music that draws on widely divergent registers. In her work atmospheric soundscapes merge with scenic travelogues, both of which are undergirded by a distinct political streak. The specter of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 looms large over the output. In fact, her work stands closer to the tradition of documentary exposés such as Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* than to that of any existing musical works.

This Should Feel Like Home tackles the most uncomfortable of questions. As a catalog of the impressions provoked upon Kouyoumdjian’s first visit to her ethnic homeland (she was born and raised in California), the music was prompted by her sense of “having things not quite sit right.” What was supposed to be a jubilant homecoming – old faded photographs finally made flesh – became a tangle of mixed emotions: joy, ambivalence, estrangement, regret, grief. Can an immigrant ever really “go back”? As Salman Rushdie would put it, perhaps the best an exile can hope for is an “imaginary homeland.”

The raucous din of local marching bands, the tolling of ancient church bells, the echoing of distant thunderstorms, the ambient noises made by visitors filing in and out of the Genocide Memorial Museum, these are the souvenirs of an expatriate. Recording the sonic traces of her journey through Armenia, Kouyoumdjian fashioned a pre-recorded back-track against which the live musicians of [Hotel Elephant](#) would perform. *This Should Feel Like Home* vouchsafes its emotional authenticity thanks to this incontestable *musique vérité*. Here are footprints of a place, relics of lives lived and died.

The raucous din of local marching bands, the tolling of ancient church bells, the echoing of distant thunderstorms, the ambient noises made by visitors filing in and out of the Genocide Memorial Museum, these are the souvenirs of an expatriate. Recording the sonic traces of her journey through Armenia, Kouyoumdjian fashioned a pre-recorded back-track against which the live musicians of [Hotel Elefant](#) would perform. *This Should Feel Like Home* vouchsafes its emotional authenticity thanks to this incontestable *musique vérité*. Here are footprints of a place, relics of lives lived and died.

Bodily and spiritually, the demands made on the Hotel Elefant players are legion. One of the problems raised by ethnic cleansing crimes is that of documentation and verification. Kouyoumdjian's tape part is a metaphor for this process. Yet the tautology of sounds "taken from real life" can easily overwhelm, inhibiting the give-and-take synergy that is the lifeblood of all chamber groups. To become a slave to technology is to relinquish potential serendipity. And this is well before the eminently practical question of who, exactly, is manning the volume knob, is taken into account. (Itchy trigger fingers need not apply.)

What can flesh-and-blood musicians say when faced with recorded sounds? Are they there to amplify the emotional trajectory traced by Kouyoumdjian's soundtrack? Can they furnish a commentary, making explicit what had only been implied, in the manner of a Greek chorus? Should they work against the grain of the tape, providing more than one perspective on a topic that can only be made intelligible by a polyphony of voices? Or perhaps they're simply redundant, powerless to say anything in response to the enduring reverberations of horror and trauma. You try to say something, only to come up with a dryness in the throat that impedes all speech.

Kouyoumdjian's music inhabits a profoundly unpleasant headspace. The climax of *This Should Feel Like Home* features an ear-splitting *blitzkrieg* of instrumental shrieking, wailing, and pounding. Air-raid sirens at fever pitch. The musicians say that the sheer exertion and strain necessary to make the section come off leaves them quite literally feeling physically unwell. They must be "barbaric and animalistic," as the score prescribes, while remaining disciplined and totally self-aware. And yet the Elefants don't complain. In a world where orchestras refuse to perform the music of Christopher Rouse without being provisioned with the latest in noise-canceling helicopter pilot headsets, this comes as a great surprise.

But the players are strongly conversant in Kouyoumdjian's idiom. They respond to the implicit political stand taken by the music. They sense that the piece exists in the space between tape and live realization, between past and future-present, between testimony and all the unsaid things that lay beneath that testimony. One person alone couldn't plumb those unarticulated depths. The individual ego would quickly get in the way. But what of twelve players, collectively building the sort of synergy that cancels out characteristic preconceptions and impulses?

Poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan once penned these words: "A poem may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on the shoreline of the heart." Which is to say that there is always something that outstrips artistic intention, *even in* genocide documentaries. Words may fail to describe exactly what goes beyond, but we're still obliged to try and string them together. By necessity, there are things about *This Should Feel Like Home* that only Kouyoumdjian's players can explain to her. It always takes a village.

Poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan once penned these words: "A poem may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the – surely not always strong – hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on the shoreline of the heart." Which is to say that there is always something that outstrips artistic intention, *even in* genocide documentaries. Words may fail to describe exactly what goes beyond, but we're still obliged to try and string them together. By necessity, there are things about *This Should Feel Like Home* that only Kouyoumdjian's players can explain to her. It always takes a village.



Hotel Elephant

This post is a part of my [participation](#) in Creating New Music, the Weill Music Institute's professional training institute for composers, ensembles, and critics.